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A university professor examines attitudes and theories relating to foreign language teaching commonly accepted by instructors and students in U.S. high schools and universities. The author attempts to distinguish the factual from the legendary, or the folklore as he refers to it, in such areas as the audiolingual approach, selection of textbooks, language laboratories, native speakers as teachers, the value of study abroad, the choice of a language to be studied, and the introduction of literature in a language program. (DS)

THE FOLKLORE OF LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Folklore is that body of "traditional customs, beliefs, tales, or sayings, especially those of a superstitious or legendary nature, preserved unreflectively among a people" (Webster's 2nd.).* When we use the word folklore, we tend to think of it in relation to primitive people; I, for example, see in my mind's eye a cluster of wooly types hunched down around a campfire while the tribal shaman or memory man spins out some tribal lore. Conventions of language teachers actually present a similar picture, though the incidentals of dress and environment are somewhat different: now the university professor is the shaman; he dispenses his lore in more stately rhythms before a microphone rather than a fire; instead of uncouth members of a tribe, we see well-groomed members of a language organization draped in a variety of ways over hard chairs in an over-heated room.

I propose to examine some of the folklore of our craft, that is, of language teaching. Specifically, I shall try to identify some of the beliefs associated with language teaching and scrutinize them as closely as we might those of an alien tribe or unfamiliar sect. The beliefs will be couched in the form of statements (folklore items), statements which are frequently made by language teachers to language teachers, statements which appear as premises in much of the pedagogical literature, statements which are so familiar to language teachers that they can be called the clichés of our craft. I do not say, indeed I cannot say, that these statements or folklore items are false, because most of them reflect a substantial measure of valuable experience. I am simply presenting them as generalized statements to which you and I might say: "Yes, but . . ."

Folklore Item 1. *The audio-lingual method is the best method for teaching a modern foreign language.* Yes, but . . . Brave indeed is the teacher who rises to challenge this statement of the most cherished dogma of the new believers. After all, every teacher wants to be teaching "in the new key"; who wants to be an "old key" teacher or even one "out of key"? I am assuming here that the audio-lingual method is characterized by the use of oral pattern drills which equip the student to manipulate the structural patterns of the target language.

Nothing in my teaching experience of fourteen years indicates that the audio-lingual method can *by itself* suffice for the effective teaching of a modern foreign language. After all, we operate in limited and limiting situations: our students use English for most of their waking day; they assemble in a classroom to grapple with the foreign language only for an hour or even less each schoolday; the time span of the school year is punctured by vacations, rallies, assemblies, school elections, fire drills, sickness, substitute teachers, not to mention attacks of boredom or of creeping adolescence. What language teacher can mention summer vacations without shuddering at the memories of the open mouths and dull looks of students returning for the second-year course of some language? We have been consistently misled and misleading by the time statements in connection with language teaching: two years of a foreign language, for example, represents a tiny fraction of two chronological years.

It seems obvious, at least to me, that, no matter how w o r t h y the audio-lingual method is in itself, it has to be supported by a variety of what are, if you will pardon the expression, traditional devices: reading, exercises, compositions, etc. In our teaching of Russian at Penn State we use a "modified audio-lingual" method, modified, that is, to fit the limitations of time which are real enough for the present-day college student and, I feel sure, for the serious high-school student as well.

At Penn State we teach the student a limited number of patterns and I have, in lighter moments, thought of giving each student who finishes a particular level a little card in Russian which he can show to the first native speakers he meets; the card would say: "I know the following patterns of your language; please limit yourselves to these patterns so that we can communicate." The trickiness of native speakers who will use patterns not in a student's textbook was well illustrated by

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the experience of a young Yugoslav who was attending a special program of American studies. The Yugoslav and his European colleagues were being introduced to the American game of baseball by an American staff member. At what he thought was the proper time the Yugoslav walked up to the American coach and carefully delivered himself of the question: "Is it now my turn at bat?" to which he received what sounded to him like "Yes, Europe." but which was undoubtedly "Yeah, you're up."

A major deficiency of the pure audio-lingual method is that it requires an infantilism on the part of people who are not in fact infants. I use the word infantilism advisedly, since by the use of the orthodox audio-lingual technique we are trying to work up from the linguistic ooze, repeated what we assume were the learning steps of the native speaker of the target language. The shortcoming of this approach is that on the high-school and college level we are dealing with students whose powers and inclinations toward rational analysis simply do not "switch off" when the teacher starts a dialogue on the "Me Tarzan—you Jane" level. The student's mental faculties operate all through the drill process, making crude contrastive analyses and refining them as new data are presented.

And so to folklore item 1 I say "yes" and without a "but" when the audio-lingual method is particularized as an audio-lingual-visual-scribal method.

Folklore Item 2. *A foreign language can be learned through language courses.* Usually people who are not connected with language teaching are more confident about the validity of this statement than professional teachers of language. To such a statement I would have to say "No, but . . . " Let me, if only for shock value, rephrase the statement in the following, admittedly negative way: *No sequence of high-school and/or college courses can guarantee even a good student a mastery of a foreign language or even competence in it.* I omit consideration of FLES here, since perhaps at some time in the future when our language programs are better developed, the FLES-HS-COLLEGE sequence will yield impressive results.

What then can be learned in our formal teaching situations? I tell my students that we can equip them with an acceptable pronunciation of Russian, that we will train them to converse within a limited range, and that we will help them achieve a basic competence in reading. The rest is up to the students and we do have gratifying evidence that some students go far beyond the limited possibilities of the classroom situation. A good student, that is, a highly motivated one, will and must take advantage of the appropriate language club, language films, and the presence of native speakers on the campus; by adding these resources to the formal network of courses, such a good student can manage to achieve a surprising fluency in a foreign language.

Folklore Item 3. *The language laboratory is a necessary component of the teaching process.* Yes, but . . . We language teachers are, I assume, generally convinced that the language lab is useful. Most of us have gone through attitudinal stages in regard to this electronic help-mate: we have been skeptical, then awed, then enthused, even fanatic, then relaxed, perhaps even indifferent, and now (hopefully) adjusted. I say "adjusted" because language labs are usually picked by someone other than the language teacher and so the latter has to adjust to the lab and not the lab to him.

We all want to have a language lab because it dramatizes what otherwise seems like dull business to our principal or dean who does not often come from our ranks and who usually feels uneasy around language teachers, fearing perhaps that they might erupt in some foreign idiom. We of course are also uneasy around him, fearing that he might ask us to take on a section of Latin since our other enrollments are so modest. No one is a greater believer in the efficacy of the language lab than the man at the top who can point with pride to this electronic symbol of progress.

I want to point out one danger in the use of the language lab, a danger which can stem from compulsory attendance. A student can sit immobilized in his electronic harness, the dulcet tones of the foreign speaker pouring over him, and yet pay no attention. The danger lies in the fact that such a student is actually developing a habit of disregarding the foreign utterances, a habit which will cripple his language learning potential. Well-structured lab drills will obviate such a danger, but I must say that well-structured drills in well-structured labs in well-structured language programs in well-structured schools are rarer than coelacanths.

Folklore Item 4. *New textbooks are better than old textbooks.* We all like new textbooks. Teachers like them because all that glossy paper looks as if it could not possibly contain a mistake or a misprint, while students like the unblemished margins for their art works and doodlings. But I think that the publishers are leading us astray in one aspect of new language textbooks, namely, in the profuse illustration of such books. In

one new Italian textbook a big photo of the Rome railway station pops up when one of the dialogue characters mentions *la stazione*. And a page or so later when *il cameriere*, "the waiter", tells the character that the station is in the center of the city, then we get a full-page picture of the center of the city.

If a new Russian textbook introduces the word *student*, then the user will find a covey of Soviet students staring morosely at him and, incidentally, taking up a whole page. One might think that I am being churlish to complain about pictures which will make a textbook appealing to our students. I am in favor of picture books which show the cultural splendors of other countries, but I think that the extravagant illustrations in our current textbooks tend to make the printed language material and exercises look dull by comparison and, in fact, positively unappetizing. Put the pictures on the wall, anyway.

I would prefer language textbooks so constructed that they could be used much as the celebrated philosopher, Santayana, used his reading material. Santayana would leave his house in the morning carrying about ten pages which he had torn out of one of his books. He would then sit on a bench and start to read, throwing a page away as he finished it; on a subsequent walk he would set out again with some more disposable pages. Using Santayana's method but avoiding littering, I would equip students with loose-leaf textbooks which would hold only the lessons being worked on. When a class finished lesson 5, for example, the students would surrender that material to the teacher and would receive lesson 6. It is all dreadfully impractical, I know, and the publishers would not stand for it for a minute, but I do like the idea of a student cutting his ties to textual material in the language learning process.

Folklore Item 5. *The best teacher of a foreign language is a native speaker of that language.* Yes, but only if three other things are true: 1) that the person is also a good teacher; 2) that he is sophisticated enough about the structure of English and the structure of his own language to be able to anticipate problem areas for the student; and 3) that he is aware of the special, perhaps I should say, peculiar psychology of American youth.

One of the problems facing a native speaker who tries to become a teacher of his own language in America is the fact that the prestige system here differs radically from that of his native country. It is always sad for me to meet a teacher, who is an "intellectual", from a Slavic country, particularly if he is middle-aged or above, and to see him trying to fit himself into our pragmatic, complicated school system. In his home country he had a great amount of status: his wife had special status; the waiters in his favorite restaurant would know his title and address him by it; in short, he was a person of stature, known and respected in his community. Here, if a waiter knew that his customer was a schoolteacher, he might not render poorer service, but certainly he would not respond with the alacrity which he would show for a lawyer or insurance man.

To be effective, the native speaker must be willing (i.e. humble enough) to examine his own language from a new angle, that is, in a contrastive way, so that he realizes that some sounds and grammatical categories which he assumed to be absolutes are merely arbitrary conventions which will trouble speakers of another language. The Slavic languages, for example, are characterized by verbal aspect to which the speaker of a Slavic language is so habituated that it is extremely difficult for him to explain how it is used. To appreciate the difficulty of analyzing and explaining grammatical phenomena of one's own language, simply try to formulate a good statement for the use of the definite and indefinite articles (the, a) or the omission of such articles in a sentence such as this.

To finish up on this folklore item, I would say that a native speaker of a foreign language who is sophisticated enough to realize that the teaching of French, let us say, is and has to be different in Berwick, Pa., than in Besancon, France, who realizes that American students, harum-scarum though they may seem at first, do have considerable ability in language learning, who can realize that his own mistakes in English are often the mirror-images of mistakes which students will make in the target language,—such a person can be an ideal teacher of his native language. However, until this ideal type becomes more abundant in our country than it now is, we shall have to depend largely on those native Americans who approach language teaching not just with enthusiasm but with professional zeal.

Folklore Item 6. *Language houses are beneficial in language learning.* Ah, come to charming New England in the summer, relax on a bosky campus while imported natives do the Schuhplattler on the green! Come and, as the attractive brochure puts it, live the language! I have no desire to ruin anyone's vacation, but I would advise any potential resident of a language house to have a clear idea of just how much contact

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he will have with authentic (and co-operative) native speakers. Do not be misled into thinking that speaking a foreign language with other non-natives like yourself ("Do you solemnly pledge not to speak a word of English during your stay at our *Haus/casa/maison/dom?*") will be of much help; usually it tends to solidify mistakes, to make available to you the new and more impressive mistakes of your fellow-students, to ruin intonational patterns, and in general to make you feel silly.

In evaluating a language house I would suggest three criteria: 1) Are the admissions policies realistic?; e.g. do they include tape or telephone interviews so that elementary students are not admitted?; 2) the ratio of native speakers of the target language to participants should be something like 1 to 5; 3) the planning of the program must be such that pleasant (Who wants to talk to a surly, underpaid native speaker?) native and non-native contacts are possible through the day.

Folklore Item 7. *Living in a foreign country is the best way to learn a language.* This is the perennial dream of tourists and "study abroad" enthusiasts. The statement has truth in it only for certain levels of learning. For a beginner it is probably the worst way to learn a language, unless he plans to spend several years there. If he picks the language up "by guess and by golly," he will end up with the "gemixte pickles" version of a foreign language which we can hear today in our large cities from immigrants who simply erupted onto our shores and had to do battle with English. Study abroad or residence abroad is best, I think, when a student or teacher of languages has reached what we might call the "take-off" stage, that is, when he already has definite though limited facility in the skills of the target language, such that he will profit from everything he does in the foreign country.

Folklore Item 8. *Language understanding makes for cultural understanding and inter-cultural friendship.* I am afraid that I cannot even say "Yes, but . . . " to this statement. Because you or I understand another person is no guarantee that we will like him; sometimes just the opposite is true in that, when we really understand another person, we can really dislike him. The candidates of our political parties have no trouble understanding each other's language, but do have trouble in being friendly to each other. And so it is with peoples and nations: cultural understanding and inter-cultural friendship derive from conditions other than mere communication; after all, the same language is spoken in Costa Rica and Cuba!

It is often said that a language program should include information about the cultural characteristics of the speakers of the target language so that we can thereby become more sympathetic towards them. Information about novel and interesting cultural characteristics does not, however, develop an appreciation of these features in the emotional apparatus of the learner. To take a humble example: I realize that garlic plays a large role in the cooking habits of certain countries, but I myself am conditioned to respond to it negatively. A minimum general statement might be this: we have on this globe about 3 billion people speaking some 3 thousand languages; we want to get along (i.e. to survive), garlic or no garlic, and to do this we must communicate and identify national interests and purposes.

Folklore Item 9. *Spanish is the easiest foreign language for Americans.* This is such a well-established item in our folklore that nothing I say will dislodge or even shake it. One effect of this wide-spread belief is, I think, that you will find the most cautious American students and also the least gifted students studying Spanish. Or at least they start it. The supposed easiness of Spanish actually derives for the situation of written Spanish in that you or I, with no knowledge of spoken Spanish, can get the gist of a page of a simple Spanish text. Thus for a Spanish course which emphasized reading and translation this folklore item would have considerable validity. But spoken Spanish is a *caballo* of a different color. Let us at this point consider a closely related item.

Folklore Item 10. *Russian is a difficult language for Americans.* Here again the writing system is at the bottom of this folk belief. The Russian orthography has to the uninitiated the appearance of a forbidding thicket which probably conceals all sorts of linguistic bear traps. And yet the writing system, which is actually very systematic, can be learned in a few days. And where Spanish has four subjunctive tenses, Russian makes do with a little particle *by;* where Spanish has two types of copulative verb, Russian has none!

Writing systems aside, all of our commonly taught languages are of equal difficulty and of equal ease, but particular languages may actually be easier or more difficult at particular stages. Spanish seems easy at first and increases in complexity, while Russian seems difficult at first and gets easier later on.

Folklore Item 11. *Works of literature should be introduced in the early stages of a language program.* To this the sophisticated professional teacher of a foreign language will immediately respond: "Come now, nobody believes that any more!" Nevertheless, it is my experience, limited as it may be, that this article of belief is widely current among language teachers, particularly among native speakers of the languages being taught. I know for a fact that some native Russians introduce the works of Pushkin (a poet of the early 19th century!) into first and second-year Russian courses. And look at the textbooks: in too many you will find substantial portions of elevated (and difficult) literary material or, ***horrible dictu,*** you will find "gutted" or simplified versions of literary works; of the two types of texts the first is justifiable from an idealistic standpoint but indefensible from a pedagogical standpoint, while the second or simplified text is justifiable from a pedagogical standpoint but indefensible from the standpoint of aesthetics or even of fair play.

Folklore Item 12. *Good students should be encouraged to study Latin.* Yes, but not just two years in high school! To be very blunt and dogmatic, let me say that two years of high-school Latin is a waste of time: not only does a student not learn enough Latin worth remembering, but he may even develop habits and attitudes toward foreign languages which will inhibit his progress in courses of modern foreign languages. I am aware that there are now "Spoken Latin" programs, but they impress me only as does the Indian rope trick, as an illusion and nothing more.

I think that teachers of Latin are doing their subject a disservice when they imitate the propaganda, materials and techniques used by their colleagues in the modern foreign languages. The problems and goals of Latin teaching are different and deserve different treatment in a high-school program of at least three and preferably four years' length. If a high school can only allot two years for Latin, I would recommend that Latin not be attempted at that school but that the two years be used for a second modern foreign language.

* * *

There are undoubtedly other interesting items in the folklore of language teaching. Whether or not the items I have specified are indeed valid can be verified by reading relevant articles in our journals and by attentive listening at our frequent conclaves. That we have a folklore in language teaching has one major consolation: we are a folk or fraternal group with ideals and values in common.